

The War of Drugs; The Colombian Perspective 1954-2023

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Overall, drug trafficking has wide-ranging consequences that affect individuals, communities, and societies at large, including health issues, violence, corruption, economic impact, social disruption, and strained international relations. In this article we will analyze the historical root causes of drug production and drug trafficking in Colombia.

Drug trafficking has severe detrimental effects for producers and consumers. It leads to increased drug abuse and addiction, resulting in severe health problems for individuals. Substance abuse can lead to physical and mental health issues, including overdose, organ damage, mental disorders, and even death. Drug trafficking often involves organized criminal networks that engage in violence to protect their operations and territory. This can lead to an increase in violent crimes such as homicides, assaults, and gang-related activities. Additionally, drug addicts may resort to criminal activities to fund their addiction. Drug trafficking can corrupt law enforcement officials, politicians, and other public servants, undermining the rule of law and eroding public trust in institutions. It can also contribute to political instability and social unrest, particularly in countries where drug cartels have significant influence and power. Drug trafficking can have a negative impact on the economy of a country. It diverts resources away from legitimate economic activities and undermines economic development. It can also lead to increased healthcare costs, law enforcement expenses, and loss of productivity due to drug-related illnesses and crimes. Social consequences: Drug trafficking can have devastating effects on communities. It tears apart families, disrupts social cohesion, and contributes to the breakdown of social fabric. It can also lead to the spread of HIV/AIDS and other infectious diseases through the sharing of contaminated needles among drug users. International relations: Drug trafficking often involves transnational criminal organizations that operate across borders. This can strain diplomatic relations between countries and lead to conflicts over drug control policies, extradition of criminals, and cooperation in law enforcement efforts.

A constant debate has been prevalent for who is to blame; consumers or producers? The blame for drug trafficking cannot be solely placed on either consumers or producers. Drug trafficking is a complex issue that involves multiple actors and factors. Producers, such as drug cartels and criminal organizations, are responsible for manufacturing and distributing illicit drugs. They exploit vulnerable communities, engage in violence, and profit from the illegal drug trade. Their actions contribute to the supply of drugs in the market. On the other hand, consumers play a significant role in fueling the demand for illicit drugs. The demand for drugs creates a lucrative market that incentivizes producers to continue trafficking. Without consumers, there would be no market for drugs, and the profitability of drug trafficking would diminish.

From Land to Criminality: The Role of Illicit Crops in Colombia (1954-2023)

This article is dedicated to analyzing the evolution of illicit crops and their influence on crime over several decades in Colombia. During the years 1954-1970, the rise of marijuana and opium was related to traditional uses for medicinal and religious purposes, without having a major impact on crime. However, the 1970-1980s period saw an increase in cocaine production and trafficking internationally, leading to the growth of drug trafficking organizations such as the Medellín Cartel and the Cali Cartel, which had pernicious effects on Colombian society. The article discusses how Pablo Escobar's drug trafficking leadership fueled the rise of the Medellín Cartel in the 1980s, generating violent confrontations and high crime rates. Despite efforts to weaken the cartel in the 1990s, new actors emerged, including paramilitary groups and guerrillas, keeping crime high due to illicit crops.

In the following decades, attempts at crop eradication and substitution are explored, as well as the signing of peace agreements with guerrilla groups in 2010, which reduced violence in some areas. Although illicit crops were reduced, new threats such as criminal gangs and small-scale trafficking emerged. And conclude in recent years, with a new government that sympathizes with the positive importance of coca and somehow illogical with the harmful presence of hydrocarbons, which produce the highest margin of national income. The article highlights the continued attention to eradication, but also underlines the importance of addressing the underlying causes of illicit crops, such as poverty and lack of opportunity. Various ways of approaching the issue are proposed, from historical analysis to approaches to sustainable development and perspectives of affected communities.

Initial Crops: Boom in marijuana cultivation in Colombia.

Marijuana, a plant of ancient origin that has been used for various purposes throughout history, has played a significant role in Colombia. From its first appearances to the present. Some key aspects of the history and background of the marijuana plant should be analyzed, focusing on its cultivation, early prohibition and its social consequences.

It would be until the 1930s that marijuana in Colombia was mostly imported. Initial state regulations focused on controlling the import and sale of the plant, without addressing its cultivation. However, in 1939 marijuana crops were detected in the country, which led the Government to order the destruction of these plantations. Despite the first measures, marijuana cultivation spread over time. In the United States, the perception of marijuana changed in the 1930s, from being seen as a vice of marginalized groups to being associated with violence. The Marihuana Tax Act of 1937 marked the beginning of federal criminalization in that country, influencing policies elsewhere, such as Colombia.¹

Thus, Colombia adopted stricter measures against marijuana in the 40s. Despite prohibitions and harsher penalties, cases of cultivation, possession and sale of marijuana continued to be common in different regions of the country, such as Barranquilla and Medellín. Marijuana was traded in marginal places and was easily available. Thus, punitive measures failed to stop the expansion of marijuana cultivation and trafficking. Authorities were often complicit with growers and traffickers, contributing to the persistence of the problem.²

Since the 50s, Colombia became a source of marijuana exports. Areas such as Santa Marta became centers of production and export to the United States. The illegal marijuana trade spread and the business became increasingly lucrative. However, the absence of authorities and corruption contributed to chaos and violence in the growing areas. The cultivation of marijuana replaced in many cases the cultivation of coffee in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, which led to the smuggling of coffee into Venezuela due to lack of labor.³

¹ ZULUAGA, Bernardo Ramírez. Some aspects of marijuana in Colombia. *Estudios de Derecho*, 1981, vol. 40, no 100, p. 413-424.

² Frank, André Gunder, Elpidio Pacios, and Inés Izaguirre. Capitalism and underdevelopment in Latin America. No. 330.98/F82cE. Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 1970.

³ SÁENZ ROVNER, Eduardo. The "Prehistory" of marijuana in Colombia: consumption and cultivation between the 30s and 60s. *Cuadernos de economía*, 2007, vol. 26, no 47, p. 205-222.

Thinking about its impact on a social level, marijuana prohibition did not achieve its goal of stopping its cultivation and trafficking. Rather, it exacerbated corruption and violence in the areas where the plant was produced and trafficked.⁴ Not only did repressive policies not solve the problem, but they also contributed to the creation of a black market that fostered crime and the marijuana underworld.⁵ The background of the history of marijuana in Colombia is marked by a cycle of prohibition, cultivation and trafficking.⁶ Repressive policies failed to control the problem and instead led to the creation of a black market in which corruption and violence prevailed.⁷

From traditional, medicinal and religious transfer to illicit crops

In the beginning, illicit crops served purely medicinal and religious purposes on the part of indigenous groups and affected the dynamics of markets at the local level. Studying the transition from ancestral use to illegal crops requires tracking the evolution of the crop. Specifically, marijuana and illicit crops have had an extensive and controversial history in different countries of the Andean region, used for various purposes over the centuries in relation mainly to medicinal uses. It has been used for purposes ranging from medicinal and religious use, to recreational consumption. Over the years, its use has evolved significantly, going through different stages and transformations and Colombia has not been the exception.⁸

Faced with some Latin American cases, the Mexican is an example that illustrates how marijuana has moved from textile and medicinal interests to recreational consumption. In this country, there have been cycles of over-the-counter, prohibition due to political and social pressures, tolerance and, most recently, decriminalization for medicinal and recreational use. This reflects how attitudes and measures taken towards marijuana can change over time and the influence of social and political factors.⁹

⁴ DAMMERT, Lucia. Drugs and insecurity in Latin America: a complex relationship. *New Society*, 2009, vol. 222, p. 112-131.

⁵ SÁENZ ROVNER, Eduardo. Between Carlos Lehder and the cocaine cowboys. The consolidation of Colombian drug trafficking networks in Miami in the 70s. *Cuadernos de economía*, 2011, vol. 30, no 54, p. 105-126.

⁶ GUANUMEN PACHECO, Merly. The narcotization of Colombia-United States relations. *Journal of International Relations, Strategy and Security*, 2012, vol. 7, no 2, p. 221-244.

⁷ PULGARÍN, Álex García. Drug trafficking in Colombia: a problem created elsewhere, imported and assumed as its own. *Law Studies*, 2010, vol. 67, no. 149, pp. 261-281.

⁸ Pascual Pastor, Francisco. "Historical approach to cocaine. From coca to cocaine." *Cocaine Monograph* (2001): 7.

⁹ Leal-Galicia, Perla, et al. "Brief history of marijuana in the West." *Rev Neurol* 67, no. 4 (2018): 133-140.

In Colombia, the cultivation and trafficking of drugs, including marijuana, have become a major challenge brimming with different changes. After the apparent "disappearance" of traditional cartels in the country, new actors and more sophisticated strategies emerged in drug production and distribution. This has led to a constant fight against drug trafficking, as the different changes have led to it becoming increasingly complex due to the professionalization of criminal groups and the technification in the use of weapons. Thus, the defense of illicit economies made the different groups evolve around the different illicit crops in a transition from economies of medicinal and ancestral uses to illegal.¹⁰

However, when analyzing the commercialization of illicit drugs, including marijuana, it is observed from a perspective of commercial transactions, an issue that occurs in Colombia and countries such as Costa Rica. It is emphasized that the sale of these substances not only seeks material gain, but also recognition. The violence associated with this activity is a central concern, since it is used to defend the market and keep the different small or medium-sized cartels around the drug in dispute.¹¹

Some studies indicate that large areas of Colombia, especially on the northern coast, in the eastern plains and in the Amazon, the Cocaine and Marijuana industries have ended with traditional practices, especially with agriculture, livestock, mining and fishing, since the profitability of the drug is much higher than the others. Reason why the land has been abandoned for these needs and creating conflicts, socio-economic throughout the region.¹²

Although Colombia is a mandatory reference on the issue of illicit economies, there is a constant in the Andean countries. Cannabis cultivation in Latin America mostly remains illegal, and growers operate in illicit markets. This carries significant risks, as those who grow marijuana, whether for their own consumption or for sale, are criminalized and face the constant threat of having their crops eradicated. This negatively affects vulnerable communities that depend on these crops as their main source of livelihood.¹³

¹⁰ Saenz Rovner, Eduardo. "The Prehistory of Marijuana in Colombia: Consumption and Cultivation Between the 30s and 60s." *Cuadernos de Economía* 26, no. 47 (2007): 205-222.

¹¹ Calderón Umaña, Rodolfo. "Local Illicit Drug Markets in Costa Rica: Analytical Keys to Understanding." 2020.

¹² GUERRÓN BORJA, Hugo. Drug trafficking and Colombian subversion and their influence in the region. Doctoral Thesis, Instituto de Altos Estudios Nacionales, 2000, p.29.

¹³ Correa, Catalina Pérez, Andrés Ruiz, and Coletta Youngers. "Cannabis cultivation in Latin America: its eradication and effects." 2019.

It is important to note that the history of cannabis in Colombia is not necessarily linked to the consumption boom in the 60s in the well-known "North American counterculture". Marijuana already had a significant presence in Colombia before this period, and its history in the country goes back much further in time under an identity of its own. Marijuana and illicit crops have undergone a significant transformation throughout the history of both the country and other places with dissimilar experiences. Its evolution in Colombia goes from its traditional use for medicinal and religious purposes, to its prohibition and subsequent decriminalization, these crops have had a complex impact on society, the economy and security. The relationship between drug trafficking and other criminal actors has also evolved over time, demonstrating the adaptability of these phenomena in response to changing factors in the political and social environment.

Trafficking Growth: Increased production and trafficking of cocaine domestically and internationally.

Examining the impact of the drug control policies of the U.S. and Colombian governments on the evolution of drug cultivation, drug trafficking, and political violence in Colombia during the nineties; it is argued that the war on drugs waged by Washington and Bogotá during this decade not only failed to curb the growth of drug trafficking and consequent corruption, but was in fact counterproductive. Among its most important unintended consequences are the accelerated expansion of drug cultivation and production activities, the dispersion and proliferation of organized crime, and the intensification of political violence and guerrilla struggle in the country.

As for the cultivation and production of drugs in Colombia and despite the contribution of almost one billion dollars in counternarcotics aid to the Colombian State during the nineties, in 1999 Colombia had become the first coca growing country in the world.

Colombia is producing more coca leaf than Peru and Bolivia combined. Between 1989 and 1998, coca leaf production grew by 140%, from 33,900 to 81,400 metric tons. More notably, production levels in 1999 more than doubled the 1998 totals, reaching about 220 tonnes. This dramatic rise in total production reflected the fact that between 1996 and 1999 the total number of hectares of coca leaf under cultivation in Colombia increased by almost 100 per cent, from 68,280 to 120,000 hectares. This expansion occurred despite the existence of a

permanent eradication program by the Colombian National Police that fumigated a record 65,000 hectares of coca in 1998 alone, approximately 50 per cent more than the total for 1997.

In 2000, the total area under cultivation was projected to increase to 200,000 hectares and could reach 500,000 hectares by 2002, if current rates of expansion continued over the next few years. Concomitantly, Colombia also maintained its position as the leading cocaine refining nation, providing about 80% of total cocaine imports into the United States in 1999. In 2000, Colombia was expected to produce between 330 and 440 metric tons of pure cocaine, both domestically grown coca and coca base brought in from Peru and Bolivia.

During the nineties, poppy (heroin raw material) production in Colombia also skyrocketed from zero in 1989 to 61 metric tons in 1998. While these production totals meant that Colombia could still be classified as a minor player in the heroin market, they allowed it to become the leading supplier to the eastern United States by the end of the decade, exporting about six metric tons of pure heroin annually. With approximately 5,000 hectares under cultivation, Colombia also continued to be a major producer of marijuana throughout the decade. In 1998 and 1999, Colombia supplied about 40% of total annual imports of *Cannabis sativa* to the US market.

Drug trafficking: Growth of drug trafficking organizations such as the Medellín Cartel and the Cali Cartel.

Two drug trafficking organizations, the Medellín Cartel and the Cali Cartel, rose as criminal empires, challenging the state and bringing Colombia into the global spotlight. Focusing on the growth and influence of these two cartels, exploring their origins, their rise to power and the consequences both locally and internationally, allows us to identify explanatory factors of the problems that arose since their inception and that still persist in various scenarios. This leads to discussion about the transition from large cartels to "small cartels", each with a different *modus operandi*, which allowed them to develop their own identities in the world of emerging illegal economies.¹⁴

To understand the rise of the Medellín and Cali cartels, it is essential to explore their origins. In the late 1970s, Colombia became a major hub for cocaine production and export to the United States and other international markets. Different regions of the country were linked

¹⁴ RESTREPO, Liliana Paredes. "Transformations and interactions of drug trafficking since the practice of violence in the nineties." *Nomads*, 2003, no. 19 (2003): 259-268.

to these illegal markets, including the Eastern Plains region.¹⁵ So coca growers in Colombia benefited from the growing demand for cocaine in the US market, and this ushered in an era of expanding drug trafficking.

The Medellín and Cali Cartels

The Medellín Cartel, headed by Pablo Escobar, built an empire based on the massive production and distribution of cocaine. His organization was characterized by its ability to infiltrate the country's government institutions. The Medellín Cartel's growth was due in large part to investment in cocaine production infrastructure, as well as the expansion of trafficking routes into the United States. Escobar and his cartel established alliances with other criminal groups and faced violent wars with rivals and authorities. As its influence grew, so did acts of terrorism and violence in the country.¹⁶

On the other hand, the Rodriguez Orejuela brothers led this criminal organization that focused on the production and export of cocaine. Faced with Escobar's death, the Cali cartel would assume the leadership of the export of cocaine to different parts of the world. The specialized literature says that this cartel stood out for an approach of corruption and infiltration in government institutions, which allowed them to have an apparent protection network.¹⁷

The U.S. Role in the Rise of Drug Trafficking

It should be noted that the rise of the Medellín and Cali cartels would not have been possible without the demand for cocaine in the United States and the growing influence of drug trafficking in the region. The United States, as the world's largest illicit drug market, played a significant role in this phenomenon. Hence the intention to combat, in alliance with the Colombian government, the drug trafficking that was affecting both countries.

Insatiable demand for cocaine from U.S. consumers fueled production and exports in Colombia. Different regions of the country, especially peasant areas, managed to promote the crop that was in high demand. In addition, U.S. anti-drug policy, such as the Andean Initiative

¹⁵ Bagley, Bruce Michael. "Drug Trafficking, Political Violence, and U.S. Foreign Policy toward Colombia in the Nineties." *Colombia Internacional*, no. 49-50 (2000): 5-38.

¹⁶ Rossi, Adriana. "Drug Trafficking and Security in Latin America." *Revista de la Bolsa de Comercio de Rosario* 1522 (2014): 46-52.

¹⁷ Cruz, Adolfo León Atehortúa, and Rivera, Diana Marcela Rojas. "Drug Trafficking in Colombia: Pioneers and Capos." *History and Space* 4, no. 31 (2008): 169-207.

and military assistance, had mixed effects on Colombia's fight against drug trafficking.¹⁸ On the one hand, temporary successes were achieved in eradicating coca crops and capturing drug trafficking leaders. Moreover, these policies also led to the militarization of the fight against drugs and the increase in violence in Colombia.¹⁹

It is necessary to remember that the United States, as the main consumer of drugs, began with prohibitionist policies. The project of the Reagan era in the eighties, aimed at restoring "order and law" in the American nation, gave rise to the so-called "war on drugs" and the "anti-supply" strategy. This generated a dual vision in the perspective on drugs, approaching both supply and demand. However, the prevailing view in the Reagan era considered that the problem of domestic drug consumption was actually an external problem, arising in the producing countries, and therefore the responsibility of foreign distributors and traffickers.²⁰

This perspective led to the creation of an anti-drug policy with a dual function. On the one hand, policies were established to punish those involved in the production and distribution of drugs, that is, drug traffickers and illegal groups engaged in drug trafficking in consumer countries, mainly the United States. On the other hand, at the core of the most relevant anti-drug policies, the Reagan-era view held that, in order to eliminate consumption, it was necessary to eliminate supply. This approach drew attention to drug-producing countries in the Andean region, with a particular emphasis on Colombia. This Andean country – Colombia – has not only set historical records in the production of metric tons of drugs, but has also been home to the most influential cartels and drug traffickers globally.

Interventionism

In the Andean region, U.S. interventionism in the face of anti-drug policy and the fight against drug trafficking has been a notorious presence. For example, only between 2008 and 2019 the American investment in anti-drug cooperation in Colombia was 5934 million dollars, with the first years between 2008 and 2011 being the ones with the highest investment. By contrast, between 2015 and 2016 at the dawn of Colombia's peace agreement, it was the lowest investment in anti-drug cooperation in 11 years of continued support by the U.S. government.

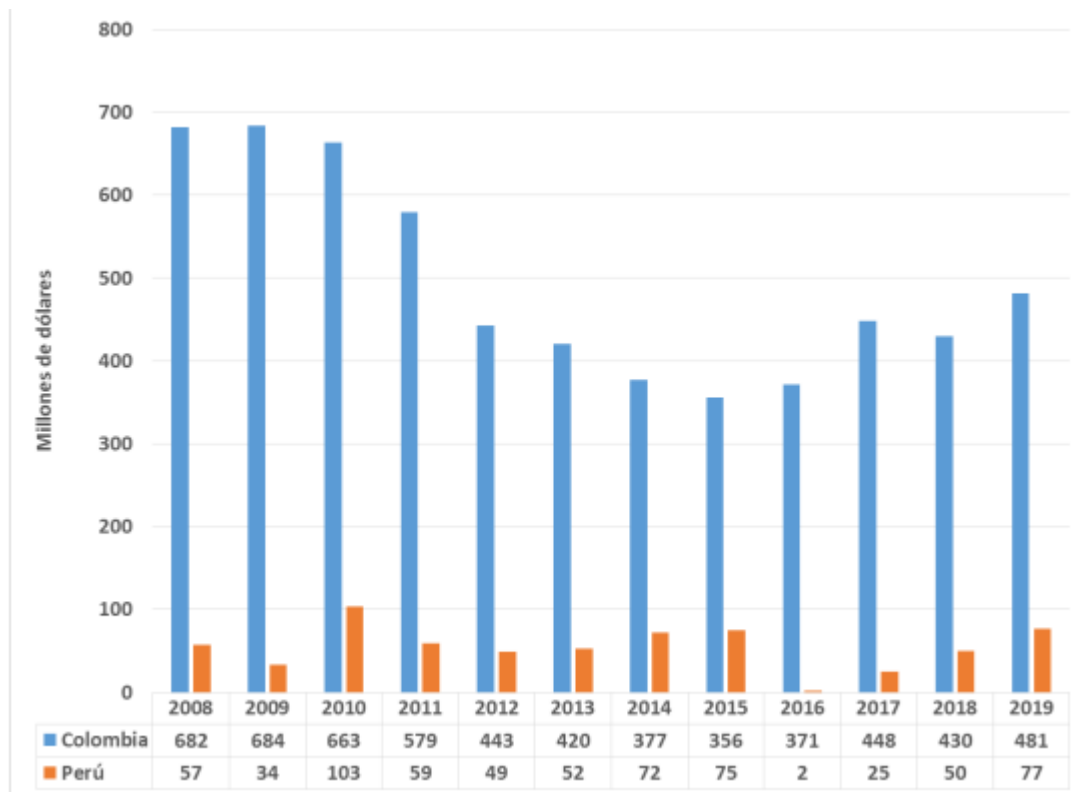
¹⁸ Maple, Moses; Royal, Leonardo. Political violence, U.S. military assistance, and coca production in the central Andes. *Revista de ciencia política* (Santiago), 2006, vol. 26, no 1, p. 25-47.

¹⁹ Steiner, Roberto, Corchuelo, Alejandra. "Economic and Institutional Repercussions of Drug Trafficking in Colombia." *Essays on Coffee Economics* 15 (1999).

²⁰ Del elmo, rosa. "The International Relations of Cocaine." *New Society* 130 (1994): 128.

This trend in the reversal of anti-drug cooperation, which, according to some statistics, has been decreasing, coincides with the decline in efforts to eradicate coca and in the passive application of anti-drug policy in the country; however, Colombia is the country that has received the most support in the fight against narcotics, following in figures the anti-drug cooperation of the United States to Peru and Colombia between 2008 and 2019:

Evolution of U.S. Anti-Drug Cooperation with Peru and Colombia



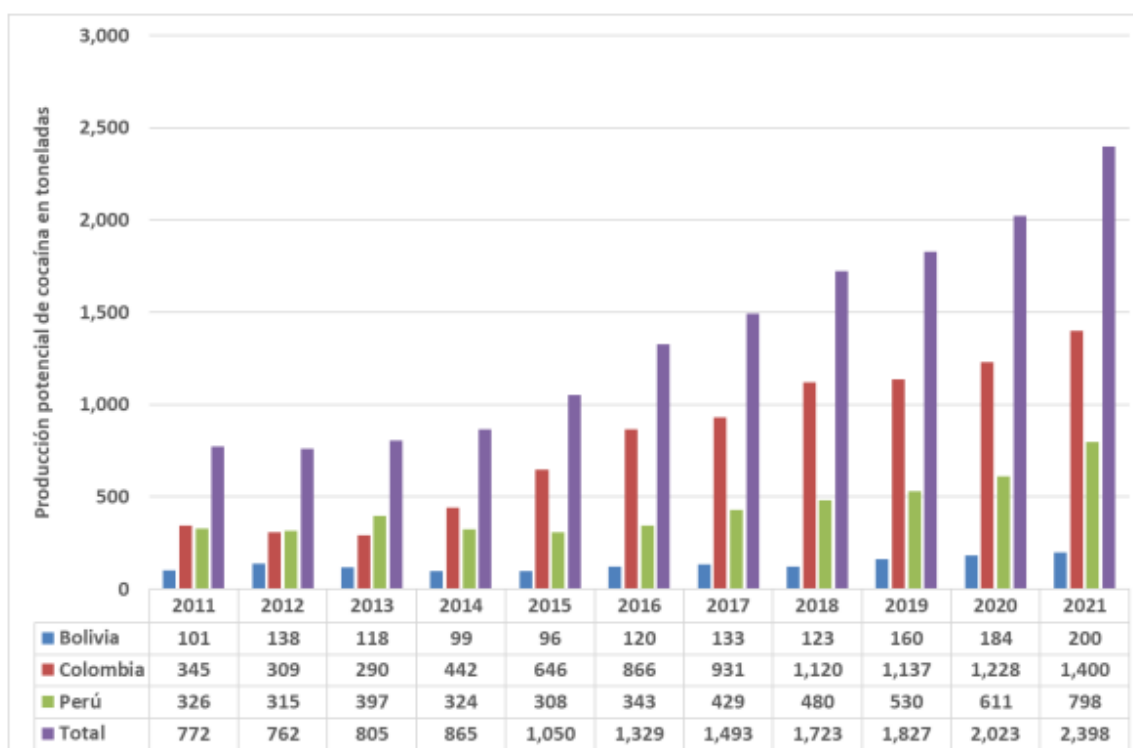
Fuente: Colombia: GAO Presentation of Department of State Data Foreign Operations and related Programs GAO-19-106. For year 2019 data from CRS from International Affairs Congressional Budget Justification. Perú: DEVIDA

In another order of considerations, it is important to highlight the estimates regarding cocaine production in Colombia during the period between 2011 and 2021. In this period, Colombia shares a prominent place with Bolivia and Peru in terms of the potential production of this substance in the Andean region. According to reports from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), during these years, Colombia would have reached approximately 8,714 tons of cocaine produced, an amount that could meet the global demand for this narcotic.

It is worth mentioning that since 2016, coinciding with the signing of the peace agreements between the Colombian government and the extinct guerrilla of the FARC (Colombian Revolutionary Forces Army), there was a notorious increase in cocaine production in the country. During this period, around 866 tonnes were accumulated, far exceeding the figures of previous years. This upward trend continued significantly between 2017 and 2021, reaching a sum of 1,400 tons in the latter year.

This increase in cocaine production after the peace agreement is directly related to the territorial dispute and control of the market by several organized armed groups (GAOs), including the Clan del Golfo, the Puntilleros and the GAOR. These organizations mobilized strategically in different regions of the national territory, not only with the purpose of boosting cocaine production, but also to sustain their illicit economies. Faced with the demilitarization of the extinct guerrillas of the FARC (Colombian Revolutionary Forces Army), GAO, GAOR and BACRIM were given way to occupy areas of dispute in the drug trafficking business. Consequently, the following graph illustrates in detail the consolidation in tons of cocaine production potential during this period:

Evolution of potential cocaine production in the Andean countries (2011-2021)



Source: UNODC and own estimates for Bolivia, Colombia Peru

The Local Consequences of Drug Trafficking

Drug trafficking had serious consequences for Colombia at the local level. The violence associated with the Medellín and Cali cartels resulted in thousands of deaths, kidnappings and forced displacement. Clashes between these cartels and the country's authorities wreaked havoc in cities and the countryside.²¹ Widespread corruption in government institutions was reported to have weakened the State's ability to effectively combat drug trafficking. Cartel leaders bribed high-level officials and maintained networks of informants and accomplices across the country.

One way to combat drug trafficking was extradition, which had serious repercussions in different parts of Colombian territory. There was an escalation of violence that both organized crime and extraditables carried out against those who supported extradition as an effective mechanism to combat drug trafficking, a period better known as the "war of extraditions."

Influence on Society: Increase in violence and corruption in Colombia due to drug trafficking.

Once the decline of the cartels arrived, it did not mean the end of drug trafficking in Colombia. Instead, other criminal groups and organizations took their place, keeping the country's illicit drug trade alive. Colombia continued to be one of the world's leading producers and exporters of cocaine.

It should be noted that drug trafficking persists in Colombia and other parts of the world. The fight against this illegal activity has been an ongoing challenge involving governments, security forces, international organizations and civil society. The legacy of the Medellín and Cali cartels lives on in Colombia's collective memory, in the history of drug trafficking, and in the modus operandi of "small cartels." These posters became symbols of the rampant violence and corruption that threatened the stability of the country. Its rise and fall are a reminder of the dangers of drug trafficking and the need to address the underlying causes of this criminal activity.

²¹ Osorio, Oscar. "Towards a fictional cartography of drug trafficking in Colombia." *Canadian Journal of Hispanic Studies* (2013): 31-54.

Dismantling the Medellín Cartel: Police operations and international efforts weaken the cartel.

New Actors: Emergence of paramilitary groups and guerrillas involved in drug trafficking.

Both paramilitarism and guerrillas have deep roots with drug trafficking in Colombia. For example, the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC) used drug trafficking as an important source of financing. They controlled coca production areas and taxed traffickers and growers in exchange for protection.²² According to a literature on the subject, it is understood that the AUC established alliances with drug cartels in the country, such as the Norte del Valle Cartel, to guarantee access to drug trafficking routes and cocaine processing laboratories.²³ In this way, the alliances they carried out allowed them to obtain significant income from drug trafficking.

It is known that control of drug trafficking routes often led to violent conflicts with other armed groups, including the guerrillas. The AUC is known to have clashed with the now-defunct FARC (Colombian Army Revolutionary Forces) and ELN (National Liberation Army) in territorial disputes related to drug trafficking. Beginning in the 2000s, the AUC demobilized as part of a peace process with the Colombian government. However, many of its members continued to be involved in criminal activities, including drug trafficking, through "bandas criminales" (BACRIM).²⁴

On the other hand, in different regions of the country the extinct guerrilla FARC (Colombian Revolutionary Forces Army) and the insurgent group National Liberation Army (ELN) have been involved in drug trafficking as a source of financing for their armed operations. They controlled coca production areas, taxed traffickers and processed cocaine. The guerrillas have maintained relations with the drug cartels. At times, they worked cooperatively,

²² POSADA, Alejandro Reyes. "Paramilitaries in Colombia: Context, Ally and Consequences." *Political Analysis* (1991): 35-42.

²³ CUBIDES, Fernando, et al. *Drug Trafficking and War in Colombia: The Paramilitaries*. Bogotá: Grupo Editorial, 2004.

²⁴ CRUZ RODRÍGUEZ, Edwin. "Studies on Paramilitarism in Colombia." *Political Analysis* 20, no. 60 (2007): 117-134.

while at other times they clashed in disputes over control of crop areas and drug trafficking routes.²⁵ These conflicts led to significant violence.

As part of the peace process with the Colombian government, the FARC (Colombian Revolutionary Forces Army) agreed to abandon drug trafficking and participate in coca crop substitution programs in 2016. However, some FARC dissidents continued drug trafficking activities. Despite the peace accords, the ELN (National Liberation Army) and FARC dissident groups have continued to be involved in drug trafficking, contributing to the persistence of this illegal activity in some regions of Colombia, with high pockets of violence.

It could be inferred that both paramilitarism and guerrillas have played an important role in drug trafficking in Colombia over the years. They have used this activity as a source of financing for their armed operations and have participated in alliances and conflicts related to the control of cultivation areas and drug trafficking routes.²⁶ Although some groups have sought to abandon drug trafficking as part of peace processes, the persistence of this illegal activity remains a present issue in the country and certain areas.

Persistence of Violence: Crime remains high due to illicit crops and competition between armed groups.

In regions of Colombia where illicit drugs such as cocaine, marijuana or poppy are grown and trafficked, violence is linked to the struggle for control of these lucrative markets. Armed groups often compete for control of trafficking routes and farming areas that trigger violent conflict.

On the issue of eradication and possible alternatives related to the implementation of new strategies to eliminate and replace coca crops in the country, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), in its document on "Eradication and substitution of illicit crops in Colombia: Challenges for the future" (2017), presents a complex panorama in relation to the phenomenon of coca and crop substitution. In this sense, the work makes a historical account of the strategies developed by the government to curb coca crops, with methods such as forced manual eradication, aerial spraying, and concludes that it has not been

²⁵ ORTIZ, Roman. "Guerrilla and Drug Trafficking in Colombia." Notebooks of the Civil Guard. Journal of Public Security (2000): 119-132.

²⁶ ECHANDÍA, Camilo. "The New Face of Drug Trafficking in Colombia." Zero Magazine, School of Finance, Government and International Relations, Universidad Externado de Colombia (2012): 38-47.

possible to contain the growth of illegal crops between 2001 and 2015. According to the statistics used in this document, which come from sources such as UNODC-SIMCI, in 2016 there was a significant increase in hectares planted with coca related according to the document, to the prohibition of aerial spraying and the increase in the price of coca leaf for that year.

By 2017, the government of the time set a goal of eradicating 100,000 hectares. To carry out this task, it combined different substitution and forced eradication programs: the Forced Eradication Program and the Comprehensive National Program for the Substitution of Illicit Crops (PNIS), with regular results, because not even half of the proposed hectares were reached.

Alternative solutions to coca cultivation are always linked to the development of better and greater institutional capacities in production areas. In this sense, in the USAID document, it is mentioned how the General Assembly of the United Nations, understood the problem of coca in Latin America, and especially Colombia, as the confluence of socio-economic factors that have prevented the development of effective policies of eradication and substitution of crops; therefore, the trend to address the problem from the UN, focuses on the concept of *alternative development*, which consists in simple terms, in improving the conditions of the rural population of the producing countries and anchoring them to the Sustainable Development Goals.

In Colombia, according to the USAID study that takes data from UNODC and SIMCI, coca growers only capture 1% of the profits that mostly remain at different levels of the marketing chain. In this sense, he mentions that economic conditions and opportunities are difficult and that only by improving this economic aspect with sustainable public policies will a long-term substitution be possible.

A historical account of the policies and projects carried out in Colombia for the eradication and substitution of illicit crops shows that different programmes have been developed with equally different results. Since 1985, as mentioned in the USAID document (2017), alternative substitution processes sponsored by both the state and international organizations began, for example: the United Nations International Drug Control Program (UNDCP), which contributed to the realization of this type of alternative programs in departments of high interest such as Cauca, Guaviare, Caquetá and Putumayo.

In this regard, CONPES 2374 of 1994 created the National Alternative Development Programme (PDA), which focused on social investment as a method for the objective of replacing and growing rural areas. In 1995 the PLANTE was created, which came to modify the old PDA. This program focused on promoting incentives to farmers who decided to substitute crops by supporting them so that they had an economic integration within legal margins. Subsequently, for the period 1998-2002, the "National Plan to Combat Drugs: Against Drugs the Solution We Are All" was built. Next, we will show the objectives set out in this program: 1) alternative development; (2) drug supply reduction; 3) demand reduction; (4) Legal and institutional strengthening; 5) environmental management and 6) national policy.

This new circumstance gave rise in 1999 to Plan Colombia (PC), which was a bilateral agreement between the United States and Colombia, with the aim of reducing the amount of illicit crops in the country and the recovery of certain areas, especially rural areas, that were under the control of insurgent and paramilitary groups. As a result of this approach, the Investment Fund for Peace (FIP) was created, which, together with previous developments of alternative policies, began its work with peasants in coca-growing areas.

Another important actor, which promoted and supported alternative developments for crop substitution was the European Union. In this sense, this entity managed in the company of the Colombian government, to establish what was called the Peace Laboratories for the accompaniment of Regional Development and Peace Programs (PDP), which sought the transformation in different dimensions of community life, which represented better living conditions for the inhabitants of rural areas.

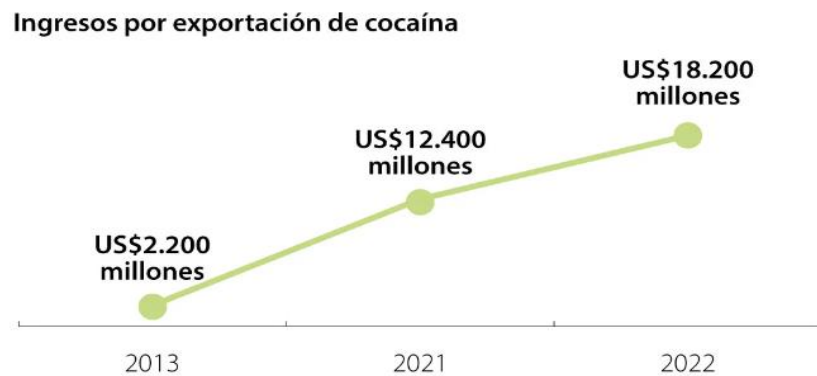
International Links: Colombia remains one of the world's leading producers of cocaine.

In recent years Colombia has been listed as the largest producer of cocaine in the world, it was estimated that the area of coca cultivation went from 143,000 hectares in 2020 to 204,000 in 2021. Some sources say this is the highest figure since the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) began collecting such data in 2001.²⁷

In the traces of ports of Colombian origin to other parts of the world, it is estimated that global coca cultivation skyrocketed by 35% from 2020 to 2021, surpassing the highest peaks

²⁷ BBC. "Colombia breaks its own record for coca cultivation, according to a new UN report." BBC.com. Last modified on [September 20, 2023]. URL: [<https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-63339722>].

at a historical level; Colombia is a protagonist in the production market, going from 1200 tons to 1400 tons in the span of these years.²⁸ Even more recently, it is argued that cocaine would overtake oil as the main export product of the country – Colombia. According to "Bloomberg Economics" an estimate has been made that calculates that revenues from cocaine exports increased to US \$ 18,200 million in 2022, not far from oil exports considered at US \$ 19,100 million in 2021.²⁹



Source: La República, September 14, 2023

<https://www.larepublica.co/economia/cocaina-superaria-al-petroleo-como-el-principal-producto-de-exportacion-de-colombia-3704868>

According to the table above, the increase in coca export earnings during the period of three Colombian governments can be observed. Since 2013, the exponential growth to 2021 is shown, where a slowdown is perceived with respect to the sample of previous years without this meaning that the annual increase in export earnings has remained in constant growth. It is important to note that, despite government efforts to combat drug trafficking and its dynamics, it has never stopped moving in the numbers and manifesting its presence in different scenarios both in the region and in the world.

Peace and Agreements: Signed peace agreements with guerrilla groups such as the FARC (Colombian Revolutionary Forces Army), reducing violence in some areas.

²⁸ The Colombian. "Colombia produces the largest amount of cocaine that is sucked in the world." Last modified [September 27, 2023]. URL: [https://www.elcolombiano.com/colombia/colombia-es-el-mayor-productor-de-cocaina-en-el-mundo-segun-la-onu-JM20799671]

²⁹ The Republic. "Cocaine would surpass oil as Colombia's main export." Last modified [September 14, 2023]. URL: [https://www.larepublica.co/economia/cocaina-superaria-al-petroleo-como-el-principal-producto-de-exportacion-de-colombia-3704868]

The peace accords between the Colombian government and the FARC, signed in 2016, represented a historic process in the search for peace in Colombia. For more than half a century, the country had been immersed in an armed conflict that left a high toll of lives lost, forced displacement and human suffering. The peace accords marked the beginning of an apparent transition from disarmament and reintegration of FARC combatants into civil society. One of the most significant achievements of these peace agreements was the reduction of violence in many areas of the country. Before the signing of the agreements, the FARC and other guerrillas were involved in activities such as kidnappings, attacks on infrastructure and confrontations with the security forces. These acts of violence caused incalculable suffering to the Colombian population and hindered the country's economic and social development.

Violence, coca and money.

At the intersection of violence, the production of illicit coca crops and easy money, a complex relationship is forged that has profoundly marked the reality of many regions in Colombia. Thus, delve into the intricate web of links that exist between these three elements – violence, coca and money – explore how cocaine production becomes a *monopsony* conditioned by violence and how the money derived from this illegal activity impacts both local communities and the national economy. Through a thorough analysis of academic research and field studies, it becomes necessary to examine how cocaine has become a disruptive factor that has shaped not only the economy, but also morals and culture in rural coca-growing societies.³⁰

The relationship between violence, cocaine and money is varied. Cocaine production is entangled in a web of violence that sustains its existence and has implications for the society and economy of coca-growing regions. Despite moral paradoxes and negative effects, coca has changed the lives of many people, offering economic opportunities they would not have had otherwise.

The production of illicit coca crops is linked to violence in many regions affected by this phenomenon. Illegal markets, such as coca, often become strict monopsonies, where a single buyer dominates the market. This situation creates an environment conducive to the use

³⁰ Serrano López, Miguel. "Monopsonic Condition of Illegal Markets: The Case of Illicit Coca Crops." *Cuadernos de Economía* 36.70 (2017): 49-73.

of violence as a means of control and sustainability of the business. Coca traffickers, in their role as buyers of raw materials, resort to force and the threat of force to secure their operations.

In the Colombian context, violence takes various forms. Insurgent groups with military capacity, such as the defunct FARC (Colombian Revolutionary Forces Army), now in dissidents, have used drug trafficking as a source of financing, becoming key players in the expansion of the armed conflict. In turn, paramilitaries and criminal gangs associated with drug trafficking have generated a scenario of violent confrontation in the country. Paramilitarism, in particular, has emerged with the aim of preserving or expanding a social order established by private interests, legally or illegally, through the use of extralegal violence.

In addition, violence becomes a factor of production within the illegal enterprise. Coca traffickers can hire security providers who operate as armies of self-defense, ensuring the safety of illegal production through the use of force. In the absence of an effective state presence, traffickers may resort indiscriminately to violence, turning it into a tool to maximize their profits.

Coca: The plant that transforms territories

The production of illicit coca crops has transformed economic and social dynamics in the affected regions. Coca often becomes an important source of income for rural communities, which has led to the integration of coca into peasant and indigenous production systems. This has led to significant changes in their lives and consumption patterns.³¹

Coca cultivation has spread rapidly in rural areas, offering agricultural day laborers high wages, which has fueled temporary migration to harvest areas. This labour mobility has allowed farmers to diversify their incomes and, in some cases, acquire land to grow other legal products.

However, the presence of coca has also led to the militarization of coca-growing regions, with insurgent and paramilitary groups controlling the coca trade. This control has generated a parallel trade in arms, agrochemicals and money laundering, further contributing to the complex economic and violent fabric surrounding coca.

³¹ López, Miguel Serrano. "Political regime and limits of democracy in regions affected by armed conflict and illicit crops: the case of Catatumbo." *Challenges* 20 (2009): 111-148.

"Easy Money": The Moral Paradox of Coca

Cocaine production provides massive cash flows to rural coca-growing communities, posing a moral paradox in these societies. On the one hand, the "easy money" derived from coca has generated social advances and upward mobility for broad sectors of the population. Peasants have found in coca a source of income that has allowed them to access land, education and employment, transforming "positively" their expectations and life trajectories.

In addition, the coca economy is characterized by lower inequality compared to other legal rural sectors, and has provided stable employment in contrast to many precarious rural economies. This has spurred collective action and the formation of lasting bonds between communities. On the other hand, the "easy money" of coca has also brought negative consequences, such as school dropout due to the integration of young people and children in paid cultivation activities, violence associated with the control of the coca trade and the interdiction of agricultural inputs that affects the competitiveness of legal crops.

On the other hand, it is known that the labor from the so-called agricultural day laborers appear in coca growing territories seasonally every time there is a harvest; That allows them to devote part of their time to other crops or urban jobs. Others save enough with scraping to buy their own piece of land, on which they often plant legal produce, interspersed or not with coca. On the basis of the foregoing, it is clear that the alternation of legal and illegal activities by coca workers does not allow differences to be established that would allow us to know in a concrete way the net income from coca activities.

However, coca has been an outstanding activity for agricultural day laborers, whose salaries in contrast to rural agricultural activities are good, argues a specialized literature. According to this, many peasants have dedicated themselves to collecting and have reported over time frequent purchases of land for successful seasons, or on the contrary, they have become creditors of the land by those peasants who decided to migrate due to violence, fumigation or the search for new alternatives.

2020-2023:

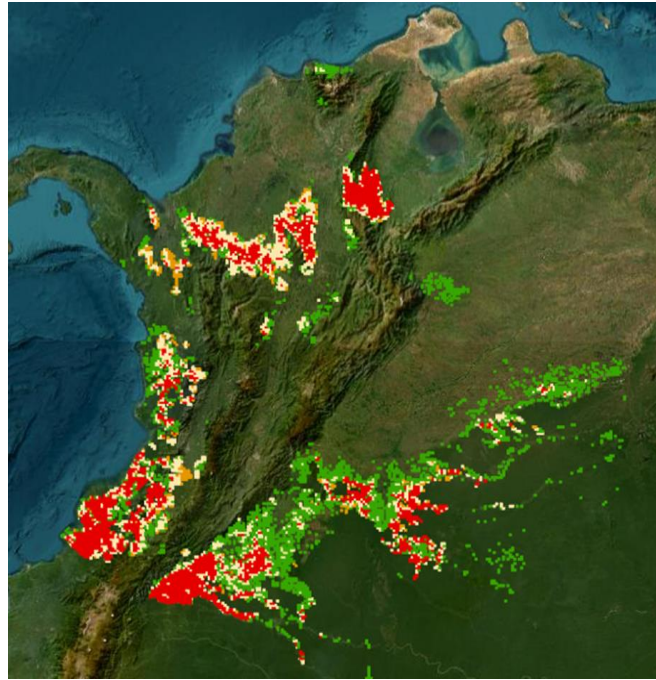
The most recent report issued by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), focused on the scrutiny of geographical areas where the existence of coca

plantations is verified, has revealed relevant findings regarding the trends and transformations that this phenomenon has experienced in recent years.

In this research exercise, a segmentation of the areas where coca plants are grown has been carried out, distinguishing between areas of high concentration and areas of lower crop density. The main objective has been to analyze the fundamental elements that affect the development of these coca production centers. In this perspective, the report concludes that this configuration is closely related to the interest of the Illegal Armed Groups (GAI) in coca cultivation, the existence of greater incentives for its production, the economic dependence of local communities, the wide availability of suitable land, the presence of conflict zones, control arrangements and persistent uncertainty in these areas. Therefore, this "coincidence" of elements generates the favorable conditions for certain territories to become important coca growing foci, this means that the complexity of the phenomenon is high, given the multiplicity of factors presented.

The report presents an analysis of the spatial distribution of coca crops through the application of geostatistical and qualitative methodologies. The results obtained yield significant conclusions. For example, 65% of coca cultivation is concentrated in the regions of Nariño, Norte de Santander and Putumayo. Of the 1,122 municipalities that make up Colombia, 185 of them register the presence of coca crops, which represents an increase of four municipalities compared to 2021. Importantly, the municipalities of Tibú, Tumaco and Puerto Asís have experienced the largest increase in coca production in the country, with a combined increase of 6,500 hectares. In the following map we find the regions with permanence of coca, and in red those with greater historical permanence that coincides with the trends that are mentioned in relation to border crossings and exit to the Pacific Ocean.

Regional distribution according to the permanence of coca cultivation.



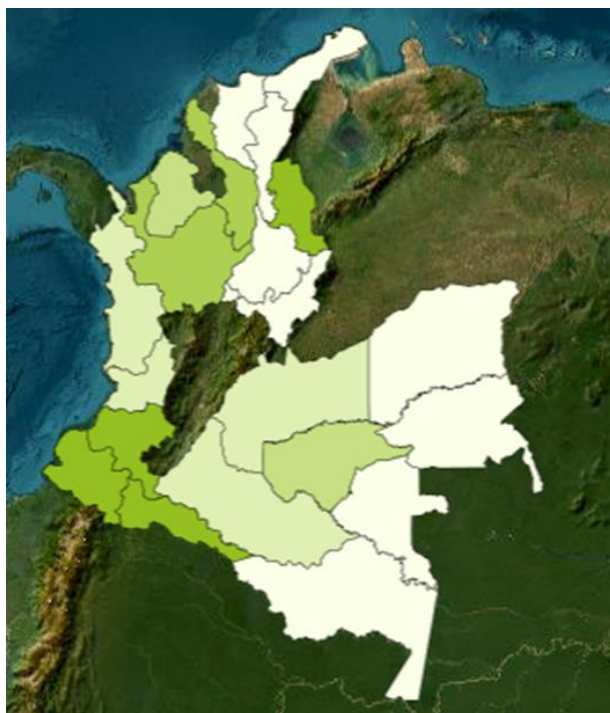
Source: UNODC-Colombia.³²

In addition, in the In 2022, the area under coca cultivation reached 230,000 hectares, an increase of 13% compared to the previous year. In terms of potential production, the report notes a 24% increase over 2021, reaching a total of 1,738 metric tons. It is important to note that coca enclaves contribute significantly to this production, representing 44% of total potential production, despite occupying only 14% of the territory destined for coca cultivation.

In map number two, we can find the dynamics of coca cultivation by territory. The level of intensity of the colors is related to the greater presence of illicit crops per hectare; which means that the most affected areas according to UNODC Colombia, has a range between 11802 and 57101 hectares.

³² Taken from, <http://visor.odc.gov.co/>.

Area affected by coca crops.



Source: UNODC Colombia.³³

On the other hand, it is relevant to highlight how the development of this economyThe illegal situation originates in areas of special interest and protection for the Colombian State. The report reveals that 49% of the area destined to coca cultivation is located in special management areas, understood as follows: 21.5% in National Natural Parks, 18% in Indigenous Reservations, 4% in Black Community Lands and 2% in Forest Reserves. The remaining 51% is grown outside these special management areas.

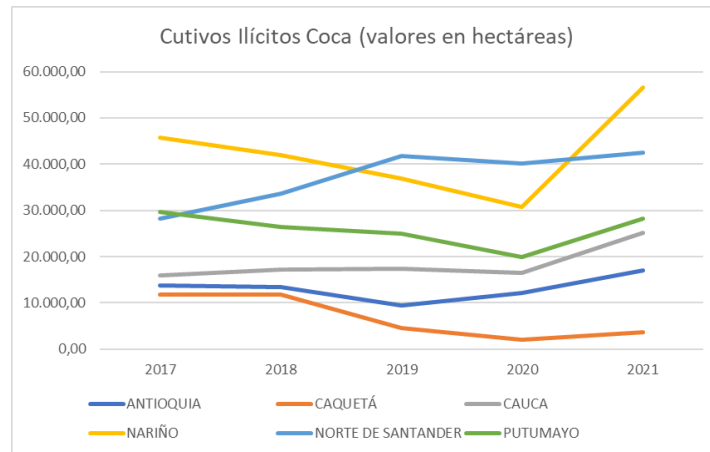
Figure 1 shows an upward trend in coca production in recent years, a phenomenon that strongly correlates with the findings presented in the report regarding the formation of coca enclaves in certain departments. In particular, the departments of Norte de Santander, Nariño and Putumayo exhibit particular characteristics that favor the creation of these foci of coca cultivation. Geographical, socio-economic and political factors converge in these regions that facilitate this phenomenon.

These enclaves are places where what is called "criminal governance" manifests itself. This concept refers to the capacity of criminal groups to assume state functions in various

³³ Ministry of Justice, Colombia Drug Observatory 2022

dimensions, taking advantage of what the specialized literature identifies as an institutional or power vacuum and the facilities offered by border crossings in terms of logistics and transportation of inputs necessary for each stage of the production chain. These border crossings are used as a means to acquire the required resources and to transport merchandise to neighboring nations, such as Venezuela and Ecuador.

Graph I

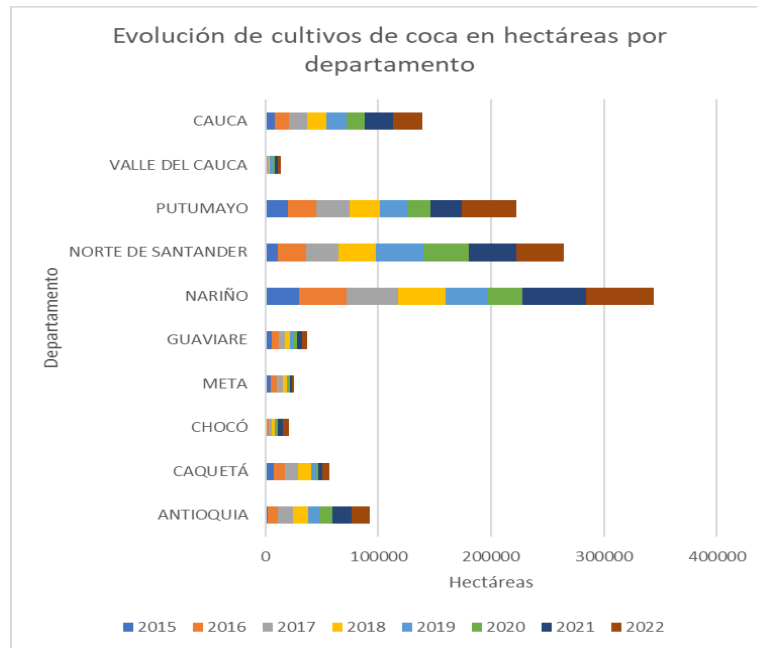


Source: Own elaboration with data from the Ministry of Justice, Colombian Drug Observatory

Some early hypotheses in the document lead to rethinking the public policy of control of the coca phenomenon. Initially, the study addresses three dimensions that are distinguished as follows: concentration zones, deconcentration zones and zones without a defined pattern. Conclusions obtained from various geospatial sources show a higher concentration of crops in areas known as enclaves. Although there was a development of deconcentration in several departments, between 2021 and 2022 there has been an increase in crops in these areas. This increase cannot be interpreted as indicative of low-impact areas, says the report, whose differences are due to factors related to the guarantees offered by the State in the context of the transition to legal economies.

In graph 2, we can find the evolution by years that the departments most affected by coca crops have had. In this, we see the evolution in the last seven years and a growing trend of the hectares planted by departments. The graph also shows the higher growth behavior in 2022 of the departments Putumayo, Cauca, Norte de Santander and Nariño.

Hectares of Coca Planted Periods 2015-2022



Source: Prepared by the author with data from the Ministry of Justice, Colombian Drug Observatory.³⁴

With regard to concentration areas, comprehensive care is suggested due to the complex situation they present. These areas show a high degree of control by the Illegal Armed Groups (GAI) that direct the business towards border crossings, which generates important coca enclaves. It is possible that the existence of these enclaves is due to the availability of transport and the ease of obtaining inputs.

World Cocaine Report. (2023).

The 2023 document on the development of cocaine worldwide reflects the dynamics of its global coca commercialization and the greater participation of international criminal groups interested in maintaining basic conditions for the development of the entire coca production chain. It is mentioned that Mexican and Balkan groups have a direct presence in Colombian territory, but not with the intention of controlling it, but with a view to maintaining stability and improving production in terms of profitability and purity and ensuring exit to the different ports of destination.

³⁴ Ministry of Justice <https://www.minjusticia.gov.co/programas-co/ODC/Paginas/SIDCO-departamento-municipio.aspx>

The report also mentions that Colombia continues to be the largest focus of cocaine exports to the world, however, there is a trend that would explain a little why the formation of coca enclaves in border areas; This change is related to a movement towards other countries in both South and Central America, especially countries with ports, which have managed in recent years to have a greater presence in this part of marketing. It is considered that cities such as Rosario in Argentina, Guayaquil and different ports in Brazil, function as export enclaves to Europe. In this sense, West Africa and some European countries with important ports have been joining this new network of cocaine commercialization, as expressed by the UN in the following statement about the report on cocaine:

"The report examines the emergence of new cocaine trafficking hubs, noting that countries in southeastern Europe and Africa – particularly those in West and Central Africa – are increasingly being used as key drug transit areas. Meanwhile, North Sea ports such as Antwerp, Rotterdam and Hamburg have eclipsed traditional entry points into Spain and Portugal for cocaine arriving in Western Europe. Traffickers are also diversifying their routes in Central America, sending more and more cocaine to Europe in addition to North America."³⁵

As can be seen, there is a growing importance of Africa as part of the coca supply chain to Europe and other continents, a phenomenon that has been consolidating in recent years. In coordination with this phenomenon, there is the growing articulation and growth of criminal gangs dedicated to the commercialization and export of drugs from the ports of Brazil to Africa; in this sense, the first capital command (Primeiro Comando da Capital, PCC), according to the report, has managed to extend its zone of influence to southern America, Africa and southeastern Europe.

On the other hand, this report detects a greater complexity and decentralization of the coca supply and marketing chain. He describes this model as a network involving various small and medium-sized organizations responsible for different aspects related to the production and marketing of coca. It also mentions that it has been documented as criminal organizations from Southeast European countries, are established in the ports of South America, to control and monitor the shipments of merchandise to Europe.

³⁵ Kondratovitch, Ioulia. "The production and consumption of cocaine is skyrocketing and diversifying." *UN News*, 16 March 2023, <https://news.un.org/es/story/2023/03/1519397>. Accessed 21 September 2023.

At the national level, GAIs have developed a decentralized network structure for the consolidation of these illegal economies. Therefore, and according to the FIP report (May 2022), these groups have differentiated capacities that work in an articulated way, fulfilling different functions throughout the production chain. In this sense, relationships can be subcontracting, brand use or provision of services³⁶. In this same report, it is stated that the armed groups have modified their objectives, since competition with or against the State is not their main interest, posing a hybrid scenario as they call it in the study, because the redirection of the conflict is associated with organized crime and not with claims of a political or insurgent nature. Another important idea of the study is related to the meaning of territorial domination where it is shown that this domain is associated with utilitarian issues of the illegal cocaine market and not as a political claim and seizure of territory as part of a subversive plan.

In the document on the economies of armed conflicts in Colombia,³⁷ it is stated that coca revenues are one of the most important causes that maintain the development of these illegal groups and the engine of the reconfiguration of different armed groups that focus on the management of a good part of the production chain of this product. The document cites a newspaper article by Ricardo Ávila Pinto, who estimates that the weight of cocaine in Colombian GDP would reach 4.5%.

The transaction of the sale is regulated by the armed group, which acts as an intermediary and deploys over the territory a control based on censuses of the inhabitants of the area who are dedicated to this business. The GAI carry out the transaction with the buyers and then pay the farmer according to the established amounts. It is important to highlight here the use of criminal governance and the level of coercion that these outlaw groups have in what has been called coca enclaves. These groups restrict the sale of base paste, taking into account market provisions. For example, when in the first months of 2023 there was a drop in coca prices, due to multiple factors such as excess production, rising gasoline, high costs of inputs for the processing of coca leaf, these groups took measures to stop the fall in prices and limited the sale of base paste to 1kg per farm. according to the Indepaz document.

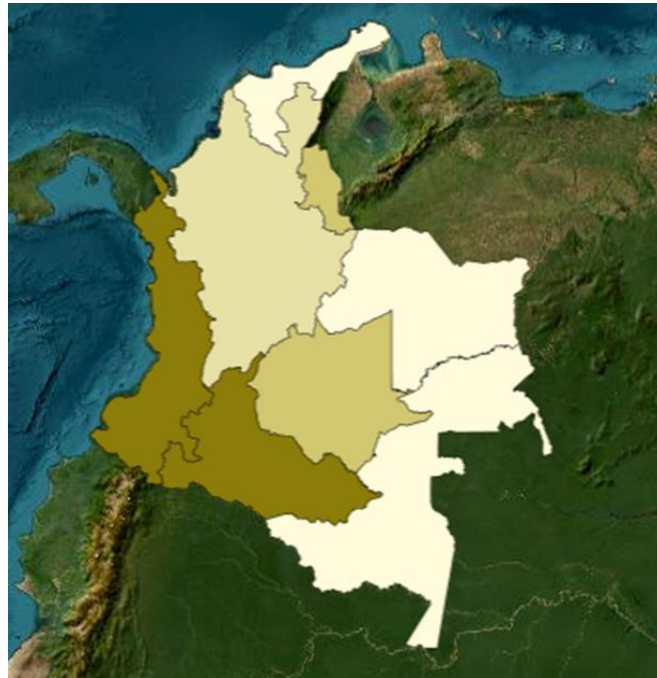
In the map presented below, the georeferencing of the development of base pasta production in the territories is carried out. According to the Colombian Drug Observatory, the highest

³⁶ Ideas for Peace Foundation. Neither Peace nor War, 2022.
URL:https://multimedia.ideaspaz.org/media/website/FIP_Infome_NiPazNiGuerra.pdf

³⁷ Indepaz (2023)

ranges for production of tons of coca base paste are concentrated in the Pacific region and the Department of Putumayo, with a range of more than 121 tons respectively.

Georeferencing of the development of coca base paste production



Source: UNODC Colombia.³⁸

Similarly, the report reports a possible control of armed groups such as the second Marquetalia³⁹ on the Nariño border with Ecuador and the ELN (National Liberation Army) between Tumaco and Pasto. This control is exercised, according to the report, based on a carnetization of the population and a strict control that resorts to violence to keep the population under the illegal "rule" of these groups. Similarly, these GAIs charge a kind of tax to buyers and allow, in some circumstances, prior commercial transactions, that groups in charge of marketing establish exclusive relations with the peasants. On the other hand, the importance of territorial control to seize the income from criminal economic activities is reflected. The report reveals how different battles have been developing that are associated with territorial disputes and rearrangements of these structures. In this sense, the Tuma-Ecuador border, the dispute for

³⁸ URL: <https://geoserver.unodc.org.co/geoserver/Censo/wms?>

³⁹ It is known as the second Marquetalia to a dissident group of the extinct FARC guerrilla, which after the peace agreement of 2016 and a brief tour of civilian life, returned to the insurgency by means of arms.

control of the route in northern Cauca, between various groups outside the law, have frequently caused forced displacement of the civilian population.

According to the Observatory of conflicts and human rights of Indepaz, the self-styled illegal armed group central general staff (EMC) in 2023 has increased its actions in the Pacific region, violating the ceasefire agreed with the Colombian government. The report shows how the Western Bloc carried out 107 armed confrontation actions negatively impacting the civilian population. In addition, the substructures with the highest number of armed confrontations affecting the civilian population are: the Jaime Martínez, Dagoberto Ramos and Carlos Patiño fronts, with 116 actions committed mainly in the department of Cauca. This criminal activity is associated with territorial disputes between the different GAIs for the control of coca routes and crops, with effects on the civilian population and in the last months of 2023 with clashes with the FFMM of Colombia after the breakdown of the ceasefire. However, it has been announced by the presidency and the High Commissioner for Peace, the start of new negotiations and a bilateral ceasefire that would enter into force on October 8, 2023.

Money laundering.

In the document Characterization and economic estimation of the value chain of drug trafficking in Colombia, a document made in agreement by the Ministry of Justice of Colombia and the Universidad del Rosario, they present the dynamics of money laundering or "laundering". As a first step, they make a definition of money laundering conceptualizing as follows: "the LA can be understood as a criminal phenomenon, whose emergence is explained because of the need for modern organized crime structures to cover up the illicit origin of the assets derived from crime ...".⁴⁰ For this study, Trade-Based Money Laundering (TBML) is one of the most recurrent methods in Colombia for money laundering; this consists of the commercial operation of easily marketable goods, which are brought especially from abroad. The second step needs filtering through customs points with poor control such as Maicao to market it in shopping centers that are characterized by high informality.

More complex methods such as import over-invoicing and export under-invoicing are also used. In the first case, according to what the document of MIJ and the Universidad del Rosario proposes, it is the creation of a front company to carry out a commercial transaction with a partner external to the country raising the real prices of the merchandise and laundering

⁴⁰ Ministry of Justice and Universidad del Rosario

the money from exchange houses, which would give the legal aspect to the origin of these moneys. In the second case, a lower value than the real value is declared for the merchandise brought from abroad, in this way, the difference between the real value and the declared one, is taken from legal exchange channels.

What is the connection with national or international terrorism?

The connections that are presented between GAI (Illegal Arm Groups) and international criminal organizations are related to the chain of the illegal coca economy and to the obtaining of weapons and technological inputs for the maintenance of criminal economies and the criminal governance they carry over the territories.

A dynamic that includes different international scenarios can be observed. At first, and closely related to the coca enclaves mentioned in this document, a series of alliances with criminal groups with border countries such as Venezuela, Ecuador and Brazil originate; countries in which in the last decade illegal structures that base their economy on the commercialization of coca have been strengthened. In this sense, we can see how in Ecuador so far in 2023, it has felt the impact of the growth of these criminal networks associated with drug trafficking, which managed to establish commercial routes from Ecuadorian ports in the Pacific with international criminal links such as the Italian Ndrangheta, whose origin can be located in the region of Calabria and who managed to have under their control ports such as Gioia Tauro, which basically ensured the entry of coca into Europe, according to InSight Crime⁴¹. This same portal, presents how Albanian mafias dispute the territorial control of the ports in Ecuador, this phenomenon being one of the causes of the significant increase in violence in the neighboring country. These Albanian criminal structures have established alliances with Italian groups such as the Ndrangheta, thus expanding their logistics operation and learning from the maritime routes that this Italian group has to place coca shipments to Eastern Europe. According to this same portal, residual organizations product of the paramilitary demobilization at the beginning of the XXI century, such as the Gulf clan or the Urabeños, formed strategic alliances with the "Italian Ndrangheta," according to this portal Insight Crime.

⁴¹<https://es.insightcrime.org/investigaciones/ndrangheta-intermediarios-versatiles-trafico-cocaina-europa/>

By sowing life, we banish drug trafficking. National Drug Policy (2023-2033).

The adoption of a new policy against drug trafficking in the new government is crossed by different dimensions such as; public health, human security, peacebuilding, environment, gender and territorial; this approach aims to guarantee, from the government's point of view, a comprehensive approach to the problem of drug trafficking in Colombia. Its general objective is as follows: "To contribute to the consolidation of peace and the care of life by advancing in reducing the vulnerabilities associated with the cultivation, production and trafficking of illicit drugs, as well as the use of psychoactive substances, reducing the negative impacts of illicit economies, weakening drug trafficking and associated illegal economies, reduce the areas of illicit crops and their transformation into illegal substances and promote fair and responsible regulation."

This strategic approach considers two important elements: the first of them related to generating and improving institutions that provide and guarantee rights to communities from different dimensions; Secondly, the strategy is aimed at carrying out decisive actions to impact the economy and the flow of inputs for coca production. This policy, according to the document, is articulated with the Security, Defense and Citizen Coexistence Policy "Guarantees for Life and Peace."

This articulation is defined as follows in the National Drug Policy document 2023-2033:

- 1) Strengthen land, sea, air and river interdiction; 2) Dismantle and affect the infrastructure at the service of drug trafficking; 3) Employ forced eradication strategically, with full observance of human rights; 4) Create and implement a methodology for validating the operational results in the eradication of illicit crops and interdiction work in the fight against illicit drugs by the security forces; 5) Establish sectoral eradication and interdiction goals, validated through the "System of capture and validation of operations"; 6) Pursue illegal finance and the fight against money laundering, as well as conduct military and police operations aimed at identifying the actors of the criminal system that generate violence, launder money, extort and profit from illegal activities; 7) Identify and characterize criminal drug trafficking organizations, using comprehensive, interdisciplinary and multicausal analyses of this illegal economy, both in its national and transnational variables; (8) Eradicate in any area crops determined to be industrial, in agreement with the National Narcotic Drugs Council, and all crops that do not comply with the productive conversion agreements.

This anti-drug policy seeks to hinder the procurement of the necessary inputs for the production of coca and other illicit drugs, while also promoting the dismantling of the networks of the production chain. The emphasis will be on the destruction of infrastructure dedicated to the production of cocaine base paste and hydrochloride, a strategy accompanied by an exercise of interdiction for the different routes of exit of coca, such as river, maritime, air and land.

Eradication will focus on so-called industrial crops or those that have not honored the commitments of the National Comprehensive Crop Substitution Program (PNIS), and that have decided to start again with coca crops.

Another important point of this document is aimed at the strategy called total peace, which in other terms can be defined as the search for the promotion of peace dialogues and processes of submission, as a tool to dismantle networks and illegal groups associated with the crime of drug trafficking.

As main objectives, this strategy seeks to implement institutional improvements for the development of crop transition projects, not only in terms of market but also in support of the safety and protection of the population. As a second measure, it focuses on the protection of environmental resources, for example, mitigating the damage of illicit crops in areas protected by the Colombian State; A third measure revolves around the promotion of policies to prevent consumption associated with psychoactive drugs. In this sense, and complementing this strategic line, the policy focused on destroying the structures or networks formed for the production and commercialization of coca is developed. In this sense, it seeks to identify the different actors, both legal and illegal, and to promote progress to defeat corruption in public institutions.

Summary and Final Thoughts:

It is important to recognize that drug trafficking is a systemic problem that requires a comprehensive approach. Blaming only one group overlooks the interconnectedness of the issue. Addressing drug trafficking requires efforts to reduce both the supply and demand for drugs. Efforts should focus on disrupting the operations of criminal organizations, strengthening law enforcement, implementing effective drug prevention and education programs, providing access to treatment and rehabilitation for drug addicts, and addressing the underlying social and economic factors that contribute to drug abuse. Ultimately, addressing drug trafficking requires a collaborative approach involving governments, international

organizations, law enforcement agencies, healthcare providers, and communities to tackle the issue from multiple angles.

The history of marijuana in Colombia is an example of how the prohibition of a substance can have unintended and counterproductive consequences. Despite initial efforts by the Colombian government to control the import and sale of marijuana, the plant eventually became a local crop and a common product in several regions of the country. The influence of U.S. legislation, such as the Marihuana Tax Act of 1937, prompted stricter policies in Colombia, but these measures failed to stop the cultivation and trafficking of marijuana. The lack of effective authorities, corruption and the complicity of some authorities contributed to the persistence of the problem.

Revenues from cocaine exports have grown over several years, leading to cocaine entering into competition in terms of revenue with oil, Colombia's most important export. The increase in cocaine export earnings reflects the size of the international cocaine market.

It is essential to address the coca problem from a comprehensive perspective that considers not only the suppression of drug production and trafficking, but also investment in sustainable economic alternatives and the strengthening of the rule of law in these regions. Only in this way can the cycle of violence, cocaine and easy money that has trapped entire communities and continues to affect many parts of the world be broken.

It should be noted that in the country, law enforcement must be strengthened to combat drug trafficking and dismantle drug trafficking networks. This can include collaborating with international cooperation, as well as working on improving the capacity of security forces.

It is necessary to track and combat money laundering operations linked to drug trafficking to cut off the sources of financing for criminal groups.

The role of the United States in the heyday of drug trafficking in Colombia was of great relevance and had a significant impact on the development of this phenomenon. The insatiable demand for cocaine by U.S. consumers fueled drug production and export in Colombia, especially in peasant areas, where coca cultivation became a lucrative activity due to high demand in the U.S. market. U.S. anti-drug policies, such as the *Andean Initiative* and *military assistance*, had mixed effects on Colombia's fight against drug trafficking. While they achieved

some temporary successes in eradicating coca crops and capturing drug trafficking leaders, they also led to the militarization of the fight against drugs and increased violence in Colombia.

Guerrillas, such as the defunct FARC (Colombian Revolutionary Forces Army) and ELN (National Liberation Army) dissidents, are also involved in drug trafficking as a source of financing for their armed operations. Like the AUC, they controlled coca production areas, taxed traffickers, and participated in cocaine production. They maintained complex relationships with drug cartels, sometimes cooperating and other times clashing in disputes over control of crop areas and drug trafficking routes. These conflicts resulted in significant levels of violence in different regions of the country.

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